A Nutritional Approach to Mental Health

Some historians believe that Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill all suffered from some form of mental illness. They could be wrong, of course, but even if they're right, the lesson for us is a positive one. If these men were able to overcome their mental health challenges and accomplish amazing things, there's hope for all of us.

Mental illness affects millions of Americans, yet it remains one of the most misunderstood of all medical maladies. Perhaps it's time we adopted a different view of mental illness, and perhaps it's time to consider alternative approaches to recovery. After all, this is the 21st century, and exciting new treatments are emerging.

Understanding Mental Illness

A mental illness is a *medical* condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning. Examples of mental illnesses include severe depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, autism spectrum disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Unlike problems with mood (such as mild anxiety or depression) which everyone experiences from time to time, mental illness profoundly affects the way a person behaves and interacts with others. It can cause a great deal of stress in people who associate with them, but it is vitally important that people who have to deal with a mentally ill person understand that a person does not choose to be mentally ill. It is not a sign of weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing. Like any other health problem, it needs to be viewed with compassion and understanding

It is now generally accepted that most mental disorders involve imbalances in or altered functioning of neurotransmitters. Neurotransmitters are the chemical messengers nerve cells use to talk to each other. This approach has given rise to the development of drugs designed to alter levels of these neurotransmitters. Unfortunately, these drugs do not correct the underlying chemical imbalances in the body and have numerous side effects.

The Nutritional Approach

Fortunately, nutrients and various natural substances can often correct these same imbalances without the side effects. This is because the synthesis of these neurotransmitters requires nutrients such as amino acids, vitamins and minerals.

For instance, serotonin is produced from the amino acid tryptophan with vitamin B6 acting as a cofactor. Serotonin is involved in mood, pain regulation, appetite control and sleep. It is an antagonist to epinephrine and norepinephrine, which are activated by stress. Depression and cravings for junk food may be linked to low levels.

In another example, dopamine can originate from one of two amino acids with iron and folate also involved in the process. Dopamine is also important for mood and aids muscle coordination and sexual arousal. Parkinson's disease is characterized by the destruction of nerve cells that produce dopamine and schizophrenics are believed to have imbalances in this neurotransmitter.

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Important Notice

The information in *Sunshine Sharing* is for educational purposes only and should not be used to diagnose and treat diseases. If you have a health problem, we recommend you consult a competent health practitioner before embarking on any course of treatment.

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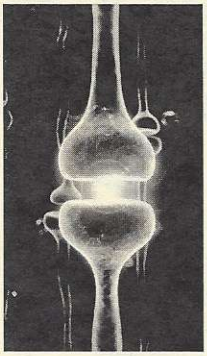

Mental Health

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As a final example, zinc and vitamin B6 are required for the synthesis and regulation of GABA. GABA prevents anxiety and helps a person maintain mental focus. Low levels are associated with tics, mania, epilepsy and schizophrenia.

When the nutrients needed to produce the various neurotransmitters are not present in the diet, levels may be too low for proper brain function. However, because mental illness tends to run in families, there may be genetic factors that cause the nutritional imbalances that disrupt neurotransmitters.

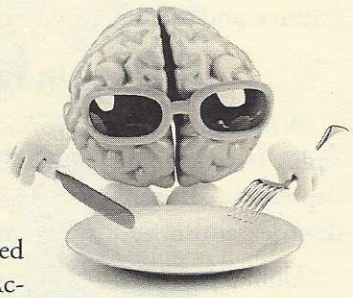
Another factor to consider is that neurotransmitters also have to be broken down when they are no longer needed. Otherwise, levels of particular neurotransmitters can get too high, also causing problems with brain function. The breakdown of neurotransmitters is done through various enzyme detoxification pathways in organs like the liver and these detoxification systems also require nutrients to function correctly. There can also be poor functioning of some pathways due to genetic differences.

In his ground-breaking book, *Nutrient Power*, Dr. William J. Walsh summarizes the history of mental health treatment and makes a convincing case for change. "Today's emphasis on psychiatric drugs will not stand the test of time. Recent advances in epigenetics and the molecular biology of the brain have provided a road map for the development of effective, natural, drug-free therapies that do not produce serious side effects," he declares.

Thanks to the work of researchers like Dr. Walsh, effective, nutrient-based therapies for mental illness are being developed and tested. In fact, nutrient-based therapies have already helped thousands of people to recover from mental illness. This modality is actually *more scientific* than the use of psychiatric drugs and is aimed at a true normalization of the brain chemistry.

In this newsletter, we'll address some of the major nutritional imbalances that may be present in mental illness. This information is presented merely as an introduction to the subject. People with serious mental health issues should seek out professional assistance in designing a nutrient-based approach.

Nutrient Therapy for Mental Health



The exact nutrients needed to balance the brain in a person suffering from mental illness will vary widely from one person to the next, but in his book, *Nutrient Power*, Dr. William J. Walsh mentions six major nutritional imbalances which underlie many mental disorders. Ideally, medical tests should be run to determine which of these factors are present in any individual; however, symptoms and clues for each of these problems are included for those willing to experiment with supplements or use intuitive forms of assessment like muscle response testing.

Here is a description of each imbalance and some basic ideas about how to correct it.

Copper Overload

Copper is an essential nutrient, but if a person gets too much copper in their body it will increase levels of norepinephrine and decreases levels of dopamine in the brain. Other possible symptoms of copper overload include hyperactivity, ringing in the ears, high anxiety, sleep problems, hemochromatosis, low thyroid, rheumatoid arthritis and emotional meltdowns.

Copper levels are regulated tightly by proteins, the most important being metallothionein (MT). Some people have a genetic inability to regulate copper, which means they need to avoid nutritional supplements containing copper. This includes liquid chlorophyll, which contains sodium copper chlorophyllin.

Zinc is a copper antagonist, so taking zinc can help to bring down copper levels. Molybdenum, sulfur, manganese, selenium, B vitamins, and vitamins C and E are also copper antagonists. **Nutri -Calm** is a good supplement to get B vitamins and vitamin C in a base of stress-reducing herbs.

If a person tends to have copper overload, it also helps to drink plenty of water and do things to relax the overstimulated sympathetic nervous system. According to Dr. Walsh, there may be a mild worsening during the first 10 days of starting a program to reduce copper levels. This is followed by clear improvement during weeks three and four and full effectiveness after three to four months.

Zinc Deficiency

Research has shown that more than 90% of people with depression, behavioral disorders, ADHD, autism and schizophrenia have depleted levels of zinc in their blood. Zinc deficiency is associated with poor immune function, poor wound healing, learning problems, anxiety, epilepsy and problems controlling one's temper. Frequent infections, poor growth during puberty, the tendency to sunburn easily, premature graying of hair and a preference for spicy foods are clues that zinc deficiency might be a problem.

Zinc is important for the brain for many reasons. First, zinc metallothionein is part of the blood-brain barrier that keeps harmful chemicals out of the brain. Zinc also helps protect brain tissue from free radical damage to the brain. Free radical damage to the brain is believed to cause Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and dementia.

Zinc is needed for the synthesis of the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine and GABA. Low levels of these neurotransmitters are associated with depression, anxiety, insomnia and difficulty concentrating.

Dr. Walsh reports that in using **Zinc** as a supplement, little improvement is seen during the first two weeks, but there is gradual

improvement thereafter. Full effectiveness of improving zinc levels is seen after 60 days.

Vitamin B6 Deficiency

Severe deficiencies of vitamin B6 have been associated with irritability, depression, loss of short-term memory and psychosis. Low B6 levels can cause nervousness, insomnia, muscle weakness and PMS. Brain levels of this nutrient are 100 times higher than blood levels, which is required for producing serotonin, dopamine and GABA, the same neurotransmitters zinc is necessary to form.

There are several forms of this vitamin. Pyridoxine is the most common, but a form called P5P is the most active. Some people do not react well to B6, but react better to P5P. If a person gets too much B6 they may develop neuropathy or have troubling dreams, but these symptoms go away after reducing the dose.

If B6 deficiencies are an issue, Dr. Walsh reports that supplementation with **Vitamin B6** usually results in noticeable improvement during the first week, with full effectiveness after one month.

Methyl-Folate Imbalances

Methylation is a critical process in many body processes. It is the major liver detoxification pathway for breaking down neurotransmitters. Folic acid (or folate) increases methylation.

Disturbed methylation and folate metabolism is common in people suffering from schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, certain behavioral disorders and Alzheimer's disease. Both undermethylation and overmethylation can cause problems. Dr. Walsh believes that genetic or acquired imbalances in methyl and folate may be responsible for more than 50% of all mental illness.

SAM-e is a natural reuptake inhibitor for serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine and can be helpful for some cases of depression. People who are undermethylators may benefit from taking SAM-e, a methyl-donor. People who are overmethylators will respond well to folic acid, but not to SAM-e.

Knowing which direction to go may require medical testing, but clues that a person may be an overmethylator include: low libido, low motivation, high anxiety, obsessive thoughts without compulsive actions, hallucinations, excessive body hair, being talkative and non-competitive and having adverse reactions to SAM-e and SSRI antidepressants.

Signs that a person may be an undermethylator include: obsessive-compulsive tendencies and ritualistic behaviors, sparse body hair, high libido, being a perfectionist, being strong willed and highly competitive in games, phobias and bad reactions to folic acid supplements, but good reactions to SSRI antidepressants.

Although it would be wise to seek professional assistance, overmethylators generally respond well to folic acid supplements, like Folic Acid Plus. Undermethylators will respond to **SAM-e.** Taking SAM-e can result in gradual improvement over the course of several months, while folic acid will show no improvement for several weeks, followed by gradual improvement thereafter.

Oxidative Stress

Oxidative stress (also known as free radical damage) occurs when there are more free radicals than the body's antioxidant systems can handle. Oxidative stress affects receptors for glutamate, known as NMDA receptors. Glutamate is a neurotransmitter involved in long-term memory. Disruption of these receptors is believed to be present in epilepsy and autism.

Certain people have a genetic tendency to pyrrole overload. When levels of this natural chemical are too high, a person will experience low levels of zinc and B6, which are bound and removed from the body by pyrroles, and high levels of oxidative stress. There is a higher incidence of pyrrole disorder among people with mental health issues like autism, depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. These people require supplementation with zinc, B6 and antioxidants.

Antioxidant supplements can help reduce oxidative stress, which can aid brain function. Good choices would include **Thai-Go**, **alpha lipoic acid** and **Brain Protex**. Alpha lipoic acid crosses the blood brain barrier and is a very good antioxidant to protect nerve cells. Brain Protex contains a mixture of antioxidants that protect brain and nerve tissue.

Amino acid imbalances

Since neurotransmitters are synthesized from amino acids, specific neurotransmitters may be enhanced by using specific amino acid supplements. For example, **5-HTP,** a metabolite of tryptophan, can boost serotonin levels. GABA is also available in **GABA Plus**.

Other Imbalances

There are many other nutritional imbalances that can be involved in mental health. These include blood sugar imbalances, heavy metal toxicity, deficiencies of omega-3 fatty acids like DHA and intestinal inflammation. For instance, **DHA** deficiency has been associated with depression, ADHD, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and dementia. Balancing blood sugar by eliminating all refined carbohydrates and eating a diet of organic meat, fresh vegetables and other healthy foods has also helped to stabilize people with mental illness.

So, people with mental health problems should also adopt a healthy diet, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and detoxify. These practices should also be combined with counseling to help a person work through any trauma or abuse that may have triggered the problems (see next page).

Additional Help and Information

For more information about how nutrition can help to resolve mental health problems, contact the person who gave you this newsletter. You can also consult the following sources:

Nutrient Power: Heal Your Biochemistry and Heal Your Brain by William J. Walsh

Activating the Healing Response by Steven Horne and Thomas Easley

The Comprehensive Guide to Nature's Sunshine Products (6th edition) by Steven Horne and Kimberly Balas

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Food for the Mind

Medical research suggests that mental illness is the result of fundamental imbalances in brain chemistry, which has led to using drugs to try to correct these imbalances. The bad news is that these drugs have numerous side effects. The good news is that balance in brain chemistry can also be restored through the use of targeted nutritional supplements.

Learn about some of the nutritional imbalances involved in mental health problems in this issue of *Sunshine Sharing*

Trauma and Mental Illness

Although there appears to be a genetic basis for the biochemical imbalances that cause mental illness, there is usually a triggering event—involving some kind of trauma or abuse—that begins the illness. Genes are regulated by the epigenome, which regulates the expression of a person's genetics. These stressful events may trigger changes in the person's epigenetics, triggering the biochemical errors that create imbalances in brain chemistry.

This is why counseling, emotional healing work or other techniques that help to release the trauma may be helpful. In his book, *Toxic Psychiatry*, Peter R. Breggin, M.D., points out that many people who are labeled "mentally ill" are simply in emotional and spiritual crisis. Their language is metaphoric and "crazy" sounding because people can't hear what the person is really trying to communicate. Delusions of grandeur ("I'm God or Napoleon", for example) can indicate that a person is struggling with their sense of importance. Because they have been unable to express their feelings logically, this symbolic language is the only way they can communicate their suffering to others.

Dr. Breggin stresses that incarcerating, drugging, and shocking these people doesn't help them work through their inner crises or resolve their repressed emotional pain. He also suggests that drugs (which include medications, alcohol, tobacco and illegal street drugs) only act to chemically lobotomize the brain and numb a person to their inner pain.

Thus, a holistic approach to mental illness would be to try to help a person deal with previous trauma and abuse, while supporting the body with appropriate nutrients and supplements to balance their biochemistry. Flower essences, like **Distress Remedy**, **Keep Cool, Be Response-Able** and **Find Strength** can be helpful in this process, as can various essential oils.